

## Distinguishing Argumentative Discourse

- The function of argumentative discourse is to resolve a difference of opinion.
- A difference of opinion arises when (1) one person takes a particular standpoint towards some issue and (2) another person does not accept this standpoint. This second person might remain neutral about the matter, or she might take an opposing standpoint. In either case, she expresses some doubt about the initial standpoint.

## Distinguishing Argumentative Discourse

In argumentative discourse, the statements people make should serve the end of reaching a reasoned resolution of the difference of opinion. We can expect someone engaged in argumentation to do a couple of things:

- Attempt to make clear the standpoint he or she is taking.
- Attempt to give *reasons* in favor of that standpoint.

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- That a standpoint is facing doubt and that some claims in arguments are designed to be *reasons* or to provide *support* for a standpoint are distinctive of argumentation.
- When we are trying to distinguish argumentation from other uses of language, we should think about (1) whether the writer/speaker has taken a standpoint that he thinks is in doubt and (2) whether the writer/speaker is putting forth *reasons* in favor of his standpoint. Is that the connection he wants you to make between his claims?

## Examples:

Far from being obsolete, park designation is an effective strategy for land protection that also benefits huge segments of the public. And with a more receptive administration and Congress in place, now is the time to act. From, “We need more crown jewels”, Erica Rosenberg, *Los Angeles Times* 9/27

*Jennifer's Body* feels composed of scraps from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* cutting room floor. The movie is less entertaining, less frightening, and less empowering than even its forgettable and formulaic box office rival *Sorority Row*. Unlike *Jennifer's Body*, *Sorority Row*, directed by relative newcomer Stewart Hendler, has no explicit social agenda. Hendler just wants to create a classic slasher flick that goes a bit beyond the “boobs and blood kind of thing.” And ultimately, *Sorority Row* treats women better because it packs in the very conventions that *Jennifer's Body* tries to challenge. From, “Sister Hacked”, Alexandra Gutierrez, *American Prospect* online 9/18

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- In some cases, there will be explicit indications that an author intends to be offering reasons for a standpoint: *for this reason, because, since, therefore, etc.*
- In other cases, it may be difficult to discern exactly what an author is up to. One way to get better at this is to take a look at some of the other things an author might be doing, and at some of the other relations that might hold between claims.

## Other uses of language: other connections between claims

- Narrative
- Description
- Association
- Elaboration
- Illustration
- Explanation

## Other connections between claims

- Keep in mind that while these things can be done for non-argumentative purposes, any of these could play a role in argumentative discourse.
- As we look at the following examples, think about what role the broader context plays in helping us determine what an author's intentions are

## Narration

In narrative, the goal is to tell a story, usually by laying out a series of events in temporal order. This ordering provides the connection between the author's statements. There is no presupposition that anyone is in doubt about whether this happened, and the author is not attempting to have one claim stand in support of another.

## Example:

From Marilynne Robinson's *Home*:

Glory took Jack upstairs to the room she had prepared for him, Luke and Teddy's room they still called it. He said, "That was kind of you", when she told him she had not put him in the same room he had had growing up. It was the same kindness her father showed her. When, half an hour later, she came upstairs with some towels for him, Jack had already hung up his clothes and set a half dozen books on the dresser....

## Description

In giving a description, as in telling a story, the author does not expect that anyone is in doubt about what she is claiming, and you don't intend for one part of your description to be anything like a *reason* for some other part. The statements are connected by the fact that they are all related to a single person, place, event, etc.

## Example:

From *Cheiro's Language of the Hand*, on "the Natural Madman":

Malformation of the brain is responsible for this type, which, by a study of the hand, can be divided into two distinct classes--that of the hopeless idiot, and that of the vicious lunatic.

In the first class we generally find a wide, sloping line of the head, formed entirely of islands and little hair lines.... In the second division of this type the line of the head, instead of being a continuous line, is made up of short, wavy branches running in all directions.

## Elaboration

In an elaboration, a group of claims is designed to give further detail about some topic. As in a description, a connection to this single topic provides the links between the topics. In an elaboration, there will be some central claim that the author is fleshing out.

## Example:

To the question, “How conservative are you?”, the American people have given the answer that they talk a very much more conservative game than they are prepared to see played. They have a voracious appetite for government. They just have a negligible willingness to pay for it. George Will (quoted on Bonevac 16-17).

We in this country have a distinct sort of society. We Americans work longer hours than any other people on earth. We switch jobs much more frequently than Western Europeans or the Japanese. We have high marriage rates and high divorce rates. We move more, volunteer more and murder each other more. “The Great Gradualist”, David Brooks, *New York Times* 8/27/09

## Illustration

In giving an illustration, an author provides examples or instances of what she is talking about.

In some cases, this can get pretty close to providing an argument for a generalization, since instances will often give you some reason to believe a generalization. We’ve got to attend closely to whether the author takes the generalization to be in doubt.

## Examples:

(21) Even more than the scientists--Dalton, Davy, and Faraday--the technocrats came from nowhere and had nothing given to them except what they earned with their hands. George Stephenson began as a cowherd; Telford, a shepherd’s son, as a stonemason. Alexander Naysmith started as an apprentice coach painter. (Bonevac 14)

## Examples:

Mr. O’Connor, who began his literary career turning out surrealistic poetry, also took to buttonholing literary lions, not always to their delight. He once sent a note up to Aldous Huxley’s hotel suite demanding five pounds and on another occasion jumped out from behind a door and shouted “Boo!” at T.S. Eliot. From the *New York Times* obituary of Philip O’Connor 6/4/98

## Examples:

In vertebrate animals, counter-current heat exchangers are common, and they are used for heat-conservation. For example, northern marine mammals have them in their flippers, ducks have them in their legs (and so can walk on ice without melting it) beavers use them to prevent heat loss through their tails, and even we have them to conserve heat in our limbs. From *The Thermal Warriors: Strategies of Insect Survival*, Bernd Heinrich.

## Explanation

Explanation is a controversial philosophical topic in its own right. There is no consensus on what it is to explain something and there are probably lots of different kinds of explanation.

Explaining something usually involves spelling out the reasons why something happened (or happens or is happening). The point of an explanation is to provide greater understanding of some phenomenon.

## Explanation

Explanations can be especially easy to confuse with arguments since both seem to involve giving reasons and since many of the same words that are clues to arguments can feature in explanations:

Argument: This bill should pass *because* too many Americans are still uninsured.

Explanation: That bridge collapsed *because* the metal had become fatigued.

## Explanation

Argument: The bill needs to pass for the following three *reasons*...

Explanation: The bridge collapsed for the following three *reasons*...

These obviously look a lot alike. To tell these apart we have to think, once again, about whether the claim that we are providing reasons for is in doubt. Is this person giving some reasons why something happened or reasons to think her claim is true?

## Examples:

Shivering...can result in a buzzing sound. African tsetse flies, *Glossina morsitans*..., are especially noisy during warm-up. It has been long reported they whine before takeoff and that the whine becomes increasingly higher-pitched throughout the warm-up, as though it were a signal in communication. We now know that the higher pitch results from the increasing temperature of the wing muscles; as the muscles become hotter they contract faster (as so produce a higher-frequency, higher-pitched, sound); by contracting faster they produce even more heat and contract faster still, etc. From *The Thermal Warriors: Strategies of Insect Survival*, Bernd Heinrich.

## Examples:

A dust storm passed through Sydney, Australia, Wednesday morning. While a thick cake of orange dust covered everything that didn't move, residents described a soft-pink, deep-red, or even yellow sky. Why would a cloud of orange dust turn the sky pink, red, and yellow?

Because tiny particles can scatter sunlight. Light interacts differently with minuscule particles than with objects in the macroscopic world. If the sky were filled with dust particles that were each significantly wider than the largest wavelength of visible light—i.e., if each one were much more than 750 nanometers wide—then the atmosphere would appear to be approximately the same color as the particles themselves. (In this case, orange.) But many of the dust particles hanging over Sydney were probably less than 750 nanometers. Sunlight scatters when it hits such small particles; its various color components are redirected in a complicated pattern, and only limited wavelengths of light pass through to the observer. Brain Palmer *Slate* 9/23/09

## Another Complication:

In some cases, an author may attempt to make an argument look like an explanation:

However painful it may be, social welfare must be cut. I shall attempt to explain this. We have been living beyond our means for many years and the high costs of the welfare state inhibit economic productivity.  
(Example from *Argumentation* Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans).

Doing this make it seem like the standpoint in doubt is something that we all agree upon.

## Association

This category seems to be a place where Bonevac puts other relations that don't seem argumentative, but that don't fit neatly anywhere else. An authors statements can be connected topically without being part of an argument, narrative, description, elaboration, illustration, or explanation.

## Example:

The Congressional Quarterly Researcher lists the top problems in public schools as identified by teachers in 1940: talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, cutting in line, dress code infraction, and littering. And in 1990: drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, assault. *Wall Street Journal* (Quoted in Bonevac 18)

## Homework for next Monday (10/5)

- Section 1.2: 8, 16, 26, 37, 40, 43, 47
- Section 3.2: 2, 8, 10, 11
- Section 3.3: 4, 11
- Section 3.4: 1, 4, 7, 8